

West Point Workforce Development Area Information Technology Plan

September 22, 2003

Note: The communities represented in this plan include West Point, Wisner, Beemer, Bancroft, Dodge, Scribner, Snyder, Oakland, Lyons, and Pender.

Telecommunications Infrastructure

Current E-Readiness Level

On a scale of 1 to 4, the e-readiness level of communities represented in the plan with respect to telecommunications infrastructure is at 2, in which some homes and businesses have cable modem, DSL or fixed wireless service available.

Dial-up access to the Internet is available throughout the area and provided by several Internet service providers. High speed Internet access in the form of either DSL or cable modem is provided by two local telecommunications companies – Great Plains Communications, Inc. and HunTel Communications, Inc. Although Qwest provides telephone service to many of the communities in the area, it doesn't offer Internet connectivity other than through its contracts with local ISP's for dial-up services. CableOne provides cable modem connectivity to homes and businesses in West Point.

Much of the high-speed Internet access provided is at speeds less than those represented in the glossary of the revised Community Information Technology Planning workbook. Dial-up users generally experience data transfer rates much less than the capacity offered by standard modems.

Fixed wireless service is currently becoming available. Skywave, a new fixed wireless provider in West Point is servicing this community and Oakland. OmniTech, a Fremont based company plans to provide service to Scribner, Snyder, Oakland and Lyons. PTFlash, a limited liability corporation formed by a group of local investors from Pender and Thurston County are working to make wireless connectivity available in that area.

Fixed wireless service is difficult to provide because of the area's topography and problems with line of site. Depending on the location of the DSLAMs, DSL doesn't reach out more than a couple miles of the city limits. Cable-modem is limited to the homes and businesses within city limits. Therefore most of the homes and businesses with high-speed Internet access are located within the city limits of the communities represented in this plan. A significant portion of the rural area beyond these communities does not have high speed Internet access. This is a problem, if indeed, electronic applications are to be deployed for agricultural purposes.

The possibility of developing an engineering plan to “fill in the gaps” for high-speed Internet access was explored. However, the telecommunications engineering firm contacted deemed it somewhat unfeasible at this time, because of the complexity and costs associated with the current technologies.

In two to five years the communities represented would like to be at a level 4 with high speed Internet access available to all homes, businesses and “ag” operations in the area, with a majority of people subscribing to the services.

Action Plan:

Suggestions include:

- Organize meetings with Congressman Bereuter and State Senator Connealy and their staffs to discuss the problems rural communities encounter while trying to become information age communities.
- Create an online directory of information technology services available to the region.
- Continue to explore ways of providing high-speed Internet access to farming and livestock operations, agribusinesses and acreages located beyond the community dominated service areas.

Economic Development and E-Commerce

Current E-Readiness Level

On a scale of 1 to 4, the e-readiness level of communities represented in the plan with respect to economic development and e-commerce is at 2 in which there is some recognition in the community that information technology is an economic development tool. Some local businesses are using information technology effectively to improve productivity and expand markets.

The communities represented in this plan do not recognize the threats and opportunities posed by the information age economy. The two information-based businesses probably targeted by local economic development groups included back-office businesses such as finance centers and insurance companies, and inbound call centers. None of the communities has tried to recruit software development companies, web service companies or information technology manufacturers. With the exception of West Point, the communities are not assisting businesses by developing and/or recruiting information technology workers.

A strength of these communities includes having industrial/business development sites that can be modified fairly quickly to meet a new or existing business’s time frame. Some, but not all of the communities’ economic development leaders have thought about incentives that may appeal to information-based businesses. Oakland, West Point, Beemer, Wisner, Dodge and Bancroft have accessible (<http://www.ci.communityname.ne.us>) community Web sites that include economic development information.

West Point is also home to a One-Stop Workforce Development Center that provides business and computer training to the citizens living in the communities represented in this plan.

West Point and Bancroft have revolving loan funds for existing and new businesses. Other resources available to the communities include the Loess Hills RC&D, The Center for Rural Affairs, University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension and the Nebraska Department of Economic Development.

Education is the key to strengthening economic development specific to e-commerce and information technology. More information about e-commerce applications is needed along with someone to help businesses adopt these applications. It was suggested by one community to have local businesses demonstrate the usefulness and potential of the Internet or to identify a successful local model or champion. With funding from the Department of Labor, the West Point Area Telecommunications Committee is working to develop an e-Business Center within the community to help local businesses establish online presences.

A more thorough assessment of economic development activities related to information technology and e-commerce needs to be made. While technology committees in Oakland and Scribner recently surveyed local businesses to determine their e-business needs, West Point conducted a similar survey during the summer of 2001.

In two to five years the communities represented would like to be at a level 3 which includes economic development efforts targeting information age businesses. Most small businesses should be using information technology effectively to improve productivity and expand markets. At least 50% of businesses will have Web sites and 85% of businesses will be online. Economic development and e-commerce was deemed a high priority.

Action Plan:

Suggestions include:

- Create a technology project in which high school students are assigned to help local businesses adopt e-business applications.
- Put together a meeting with DED staff to get a better perspective of what information-based businesses are looking for in the way of building sites, facilities, telecommunications infrastructure, utility services and the labor market.
- Work with director of the University of Nebraska Rural Initiative to provide a college intern over the summer to work with local businesses to enhance and incorporate more complex e-applications into their Web sites.
- Sponsor e-commerce training in two communities in 2004.
- Coordinate a technology fair at which hardware vendors, software developers, consultants and others demonstrate products and applications to small business owners, managers and employees.

Local Government and Community Services

Current E-Readiness Level

On a scale of 1 to 4 the e-readiness level of the communities represented in the plan with respect to local government and community services is between 1 and 2. Several communities have informational Web sites, however most are limited to economic development information. While some city employees and council members have email addresses, less than half of those use or check email on a regular basis.

Meeting agendas and minutes (with the exception of Cuming County), budget documents, property tax appraisals ordinances, land use and zoning maps, permits, forms and applications are not available online. West Point's city Web site along with the West Point Chamber of Commerce Web site includes information of specific interest to newcomers and visitors. The West Point city site also publicizes community events. None of the communities maintain Web sites that provide a forum for discussion of local issues.

Local government officials and private telecommunications providers usually do not talk about the plans and needs or serving the local communities unless the providers come to council meetings.

Having local economic development information available online is a strength for these communities. The Nebraska Public Power District has been instrumental in helping communities develop Web sites with economic development information. Nebraska Online is another resource helping counties establish Web sites. Another strength identified is the use of email by public officials.

Some ways in which local government's e-readiness could be strengthened include making public officials more aware of the benefits and efficiencies associated with e-government. Providing online forms and more general information would enhance these sites and make them more useful to citizens. Designing community Web sites using citizen input was also suggested.

While e-government is viewed as important, public officials are concerned about the costs associated with developing local government Web sites, along with the time, personnel and technical support required to successfully manage and maintain such sites. Employees would have to be trained and content would have to be provided from a variety of departments and offices.

In two to five years the communities represented in this plan would like to be at either level 3 or 4 with local governments using information technology to run operations more efficiently; serving citizens 24/7; and having the capability to electronically transact business and payments. This area was also deemed a high priority.

Action Plan:

Suggestions include:

- Offer basic computer and Internet training to county and local government officials and employees.
- Offer Cooperative Extension's Access e-Gov training to county and local government officials and employees.